

Legal Environment

The constitution recognizes freedom of the press as well as the right to information. Nevertheless, there are a number of legislative restrictions on press freedom, and the state has tolerated harassment of journalists and taken legal action against critical media outlets. Hate speech carries a maximum prison sentence of five years. Under the criminal code, insulting the “Republic of Croatia, its coat of arms, national anthem, or flag” can lead to a three-year prison sentence.

Libel remains a criminal offense, although the parliament removed imprisonment as a possible punishment in 2006. In September 2014, the Zagreb Municipal Civil Court found the television station RTL guilty of slander and ordered it to pay 50,000 Croatian kuna (\$8,400) to Zagreb mayor Milan Bandić; the case was related to a 2013 RTL broadcast in which Zoran Milanović, Croatia’s prime minister, had accused Bandić of corruption. According to the Croatian Journalists’ Association (CJA), there were more than 40 pending criminal defamation and insult cases against journalists as of April 2014 alone.

Amendments to the criminal code introduced in 2013 defined “shaming” as a criminal offense punishable by significant fines, even if the claims in question are proven true. In April 2014, Slavica Lukić became the first journalist to be convicted of the offense after reporting that the medical company Medikol faced financial distress despite receiving substantial funding from the state. She was fined 26,000 kuna (\$4,700). Following criticism by media professionals and watchdogs, the parliament began considering changes to the amendments in question, including the possibility of allowing individuals to defend themselves against the offense of shaming by proving their statements to be true, or establishing reasonable grounds for publishing them. Discussions continued throughout the year, although no legislative changes were made.

In 2013, Croatia adopted the Law on the Right of Access to Information. The legislation includes a proportionality and public-interest test designed to determine a balance between reasons for disclosing information and reasons for restricting it, and establishes an independent information commissioner to monitor compliance.

The Agency for Electronic Media, an independent regulator, licenses broadcast outlets. Journalists have criticized nontransparent practices by the body, and have noted that licenses have been denied due to a poor understanding of Croatia’s media sector among the agency’s staff—particularly of the role of internet-based broadcasters. There has also been some concern regarding the agency’s use of funds meant for the promotion of commercial television and radio productions. There is no licensing requirement for media that do not use the broadcast frequency spectrum. Print media must register with the Chamber of Commerce.

The CJA is considered a model for the region. It holds journalists to a highly professional code of ethics, and its Council of Honor is responsible for reviewing complaints. However, membership in the CJA continued to decline in 2014, partly due to a decrease in the number of journalists operating in Croatia’s difficult economic environment as well as in the number of working journalists interested in joining a union.

The state-owned public broadcaster, Croatia Radio-Television (HRT), is funded through advertising revenue and licensing fees. It is often seen as representing political interests, especially since its director general, board members, and administrators are appointed by the parliament. In recent years, the broadcaster has been criticized for censoring and suspending programs without explanation, politicizing personnel decisions, lacking transparency, and failing to respect professional standards.

Political Environment

Journalists, especially those covering corruption, organized crime, and war crimes, continue to face harassment as a result of their work, although physical violence against journalists has significantly decreased in recent years. These risks, as well as the risk of losing advertising contracts over critical reporting or coverage of sensitive topics, encourage self-censorship.

Journalists experienced interference from the authorities on several occasions in 2014. In March, government officials tried to discredit journalist Danka Derifaj after she reported on alleged nepotism in the local administration of the town of Jastrebarsko. In May, authorities scrutinized the news website Index.hr in the wake of its critical reporting on financial issues in Croatia, prompting concern from media freedom advocates that the attention was punitive. Also in May, the South East Europe Media Organization, an advocacy group, reported that the mayor of Split had been reluctant to inform journalist Dragan Miljus of Index.hr about local government affairs after Miljus published articles critical of Split's administration.

In March, some attendees of a carnival in Omis burned an effigy of journalist Vinko Vuković, who had reported on corruption in the town prior to the incident. In June, Drago Pilsel received a death threat after he published an article about Drako Kordić, a convicted war criminal who had recently been released from prison. In August, several assailants attacked journalist and rights activist Domagoj Margetić near his home in Zagreb.

Economic Environment

Dozens of private television and radio stations, both local and national, disseminate a variety of views. Cable and satellite television access is also common. While private media owners must be registered, the records are not easily accessible to the public and often do not clearly or fully indicate owner identities. Many private media owners hold interests in other industries, creating commercial and political pressure that can reduce critical news coverage of the government or influential commercial entities.

Croatia's largest business conglomerate accounts for the bulk of advertising share in the country and also owns Tisak, the nationwide newspaper distributor. Zagreb-based Europa Press Holdings and Austria's Styria control most of the print media market, raising concerns about concentration. Dwindling newspaper circulation and a decline in advertising revenue due to the global economic crisis have left many media outlets financially weak, leading to a blurring of the lines between journalism, advertising, and public relations, and making it difficult for outlets to publish content critical of their advertisers. A number of media outlets are controlled by the banks that hold their loans or the advertising companies that provide much of their revenue. A significant percentage of local media outlets are partially owned by their local governments, jeopardizing independent reporting of local politics.

Journalists' salaries have experienced declines since 2008, forcing many reporters to take second or third jobs. Some journalists have reported that they do not get paid regularly. Professional standards have declined, as journalists compete for a decreasing number of jobs and rush to produce content quickly.

The government does not restrict access to the internet, which was used by 69 percent of the population in 2014. Croatians have access to a relatively large number of online media, and readership of online sources of news and information is steadily climbing. Online news outlets, which are not as reliant on advertising as traditional platforms, can in some cases facilitate more independent reporting. However, online outlets also

face the challenge of inadequate funding. Inconsistent standards for reporting and a lack of sustainable business practices remain pervasive problems among internet-based news outlets, many of which copy content from other portals.